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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the teaching of an African American educator and her fifth-grade classroom in an elementary school in a working class neighborhood. The paper presents the results of a qualitative study of what makes the teaching of this teacher exceptional. Of the 17 students in this class, 7 speak English as a Second Language. Some are immigrants or children of immigrants, but most have lived in the United States for several generations. Findings show that this teacher's ways of helping her students achieve excellence is a combination of mutual respect, developing awareness, creating a community, helping students grow as people, helping students "get it," and creating scholars. The teacher helps her students achieve academic success while maintaining a positive identity as African Americans. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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What Makes the Teaching of an African-American Urban Educator Exceptional?

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Introduction

This research describes the urban classroom and teaching of an African American educator. Participants included teacher and students in an urban elementary school in a working class neighborhood in the Northeast. This paper presents results of a classroom qualitative study investigating: "What makes the teaching of an African-American urban educator exceptional?" Understanding what successful urban teachers do to help their students learn is useful and necessary for teachers, teacher researchers, school administrators and teacher educators. Studying excellent teachers, such as this particular educator, serves as a successful working model for new teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers to use as a guide for educating new teachers and for making educational policy. Ladson-Billings (1995) states the need for teachers to address the learning of all children, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, or racial background.

Conceptual Perspective

Ladson-Billings (1995) states that the national educational reform movements of the 1980's have alerted the world to the problems of education in the United States, but that the education reform movement has ignored the necessity for teachers to address the needs of all students regardless of their racial, ethnic, or cultural background. One of our greatest educational challenges is to improve the education of students in urban schools. Urban schools in the United States are increasingly populated by students of color, predominantly black and Hispanic, poor, speakers of English as a second language, many who receive profoundly low achievement scores, and markedly higher drop-out and illiteracy rates (Nieto, 1995). The percentage of students at risk of failure is highest in urban schools, where conditions of poverty also are prevalent (Kozol, 1991).

Perhaps in consideration of Kozol's 1991 text, Lois Weiner (1993) suggests that most influential depictions of teaching in city schools are those written about actual

conditions and events that occur there. This type of writing about first-hand experience serves to generate blame instead of explain recurrent educational patterns (Weiner, 1993). In addition, Weiner (1993) views the overall ideological frame to be one based on a model of deficiency. Delpit (1995) agrees that prospective teachers are shown models of failure in urban education rather than models of success. Delpit believes that we must make available to pre-service teachers success stories about teaching poor children and children of color. We need to study those classrooms in which educators are successfully teaching and their students are learning. We then need to use this research to educate beginning teachers about the many teachers who successfully and exceptionally teach poor and culturally diverse students.

In order to begin to understand the social construction of race, poverty, and urban education as described by researchers like Kozol (1991), new teachers must develop a critical understanding of race, ethnicity, gender, ethics, and educational issues related to these that schools and teachers of education neglect to address (Macedo, 1995). For these reasons, it is imperative that educators and policy makers address the learning needs of all students in urban schools. It is also important that teachers and schools of education study exemplary teaching and teachers in urban schools to use as models for pre-service teachers. There is a need for educators to understand more about the ways conditions in urban schools influence teachers' and students' behavior, attitudes, and interaction (Weiner, 1993). There is also a need for educators to understand the philosophy, actions, and behaviors of exceptional teachers in urban schools so that we may use them to inform teacher preparation and practice.

Background

In this study, I observed the workings of a fifth grade classroom in an urban school in the Northeast, and what this African-American, middle-class teacher and her students do to promote learning in the classroom. I investigated this teacher because of her reputation

for and my observing of her ability to reach all students in her class. I also was interested in observing the daily communication and teaching behaviors of this teacher, a middle-class African-American, and a multiethnic, working-class group of students. The process of learning the inner workings of this classroom included interviewing the teacher and students about what this teacher does to help all her students learn. A grounded theory approach to analyzing interview and observational data was used to discover what components made the classroom teaching of this particular educator exceptional despite the school system demands on her as a teacher.

I entered into this classroom with certain assumptions. I thought that the classroom culture would be different from that of classrooms in suburban, middle-class districts. It was my assumption that the ethnic and language background of these students and this teacher would greatly influence the culture of this learning environment. It was also my assumption that the policies instituted in the school district would also influence what went on in classrooms. These assumptions parallel those articulated by Ladson-Billings (1994) and Weiner (1993).

Setting and Participants

This project focused on one female, middle-class, African-American teacher in her mid-forties, who has had twenty-five years of teaching experience in pre-K through grade 5. This particular teacher (M.C. will be used as a pseudonym) has taught in several urban schools in the same city district. The seventeen students in the class are African, African-American, Latino/a, and Asian. Seven of the students speak English as a Second Language. Several students are African or Columbian immigrants themselves; others have parents who are immigrants. However, the majority of students and their parents have lived in the United States for several generations.

Methodology and Data Collection

This is a qualitative study of an urban fifth grade classroom. Participant observations and interviews were conducted during a period of 9 weeks in a multiethnic, working class neighborhood in the Northeast. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed following a grounded theory approach described by Strauss and Corbin (1994) and Charmaz (1983). Several graphics were designed to organize interview and observation data to form more abstract concepts of students' and teacher interpretations.

Classroom participant observations and interviews were conducted during 2-3 hour periods twice a week for 9 weeks (approximately 40 hours) during which time I served as an assistant to the teacher. Other observations included accompanying the class to a school assembly, to the playground, and in the hallways. Interviews included individual and focus groups during afternoon hours only, so as not to disrupt the morning work time. Individual in-depth student interviews were conducted with 4 student volunteers. Other interviews included an in-depth teacher interview, 2 student focus groups on what the teacher does to help them learn, and 1 focus reading group with students making collective sense of a Basal text of their choice. On many occasions, the teacher and I informally discussed issues, incidents, or particular children.

Student and teacher interviews were used as member checks for observations. The semi-structured individual and group interviews ranged in time from 20 to 45 minutes and followed a general set of questions. Interviews with focus groups consisted of 3 to 4 fifth grade voluntary informants and were conducted for 20 minutes each. Within the student interviews students were asked what their teacher does to help them learn in their classroom and what goals they think their teacher has for them. During the teacher interview, she was asked what she wants to have happen in her classroom, what goals she has for her students, and what her beliefs are about her classroom and school.

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Emerging Theory

The theory that emerged from the data described the teacher's emphasis on the process of helping students grow as people despite the emphasis of the district and her school on product-oriented tasks. This particular teacher's ways of helping her students achieve excellence is a combination of these components: mutual respect, developing awareness, creating a community, helping students to grow as people, helping students "get it", and creating scholars. A graphic summarizes the components of what this teacher does to promote student learning and excellence in her classroom (See Figure 1).

Helping students to grow emotionally and socially is of utmost importance to the teacher (M.C.) and the students. M.C. believes that students' academic achievement will improve along with self-awareness and self-confidence if they are listened to and consistently supported.

> M.C.: I want them to grow as people. I can't tell you enough--that is really what makes a difference to me. I mean academics is almost secondary--but it happens anyhow if you can get them feeling good about themselves and being very conscious about who they are and realizing how they do something, and being invested in something that's theirs.

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> M.C.: The last couple of years I've changed...how I think things should be...and I've found that it's successful, and I've found that it works with the little kids and I've found that it works for the big kids, so for me, until something else hits me and tells me to do something else, that's how I will flow. And I'm going back to kindergarten, that's where you need to start it really, their first experience of what school is all about --and if you can plant some of those seeds with them--starting--and can continue, then I think you can have successful students.

M.C. also believes it important to encourage students' strengths, to help them improve upon what they already do well, and to have others know about it.

> M.C.: And it's really important to say what they're really good at--and to let them know and let them shine in those areas. And then, you know, the regular, ABC's and all that other junk that follows is important, but, you know, I'm finding that we really have to tune into where the kids are at, and foster what's really good in them. And it's not grades, and it's not how well you can do this math lesson, but what you're really good at, and really
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> put your energy in that, and you see that these other things come along too, and you do have to put forth effort, but if you're really good in this area, let's really push that--and get that really strong.

In addition to supporting the positive things that her students do, M.C. listens to her students when they are having difficulty. This year, M.C. has had problems with the behavior of several students in her class. When asked about what she does about this situation, M.C. responds that these students help her make decisions about where to place them in the classroom if their behavior is unacceptable.

> M.C.: You just keep changing and moving it. Almost like a chess game--try it here, try it there, and after a while, once the kids know you and after you have a feel for who they are, then let them help make those decisions too. You give them a chance...
> Yesterday, A. asked me if he could move back there so he could stay out of trouble. So, Yeah, go ahead.
> And E.--and she's having such a hard time, so she moved her desk way over there by the window and said, 'M. C., please let me do this because I keep gettin' in trouble'. So you try those kinds of things...and they help you solve some of those problems sometimes. If you're in tune, and you listen to kids, sometimes they can help you help them.

Through this practice, M.C. shows her advocacy for her students to make good decisions for themselves. She expects that her students will learn what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior, and will more often take the initiative to place themselves in better working situations.

In an interview, one student who has had marked improvement in conduct this year said about her change in behavior:

> S.: ...At first in the beginning of the year, I was being bad. And I got a D on my conduct, and I got mad and everything. and then I got mad, cuz then I started to get to know M.C. a little more. That I started being better, and M. C. gave me good grades...I got a C then A.

"Growing People"

M.C.'s students know that she has confidence in their abilities, yet they know what they need to work on. In her students, she emphasizes developing awareness of attitude, and presentation of self and work. With this particular group of students, she has worked

especially hard. Many individuals in this class have had difficulties with behavior issues in previous years, and have been described by some other school faculty and students as a difficult group.

> M.C: The kids have a reputation:
> the way you carry yourself, the words you use, how you say things, how you do things: that's how you get a reputation. We spend time talking about it.

In order to instill in her students a sense of agency for positive change, M.C. has instituted a monthly class activity, Tools For Success, in which each student, based on his/her own experiences and needs, writes a personal goal for the month. Most of the goals are social in nature--how students get along with others--but they can be social or academic. At the end of the month, students decide if they have met their goal. M.C. reviews their evidence and decides if she agrees or not. For the next month, students may repeat a goal if it has not been met, or choose a new one.

In interviews, students talk about learning to conduct themselves appropriately and to get along with others.

> *A.S: What does M.C. work on with you in your class?*
> R: She's prepping, our social skills and our feelings.
> She wants us to graduate and be proud of ourselves.
> S: She's trying to teach us respect. Discretion.
> D: Manners.
> S: In M.C's my D (in conduct) went up to a C. In 4th grade and 3rd grade my D would stay D.

Many of M.C's beliefs about teaching and learning have been developed through raising her own child. To <u>create scholars</u>, she believes that it is essential to hold high expectations for students, to make them think. M.C has worked at finding a balance about how and when to push the students. M.C. makes a point to herself and her students that she does not expect perfection.

> M.C.: I've found that by having a child of my own, because I want the very best for her, and so you're always pushing, pushing, pushing, and that's fine, but... sometimes the kids only hear the pushing, and they don't hear

the other part, and so you have to watch that that doesn't get distorted either. Not that you want them to be perfect, you know, and you have to watch that... But you have to always be very conscious about how you push. And kids react differently, so you have to be in tune to each individual--you know, is it too much for this one, not enough for this one--so you have to really focus in on the individual kids.

In her classroom interactions, M.C. consistently emphasizes mutual respect.

A.S.: What do you want the students to get from being in your class?:
M.C.: That respect piece. I know they know, and even though they'll slide, and they'll mess up, they know, in their deepest gut what I expect and what I want from them. And you'll see it come back...and they'll go away from it, but they'll come back to it, or they'll say something where it reassures you that they've heard what you're talking about and their in tune with what you want and when they've really crossed the line, you'll hear some kids trying to get them back on track too. That piece is really important and they know it...I feel they honestly know it.

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M.C.: I want to get them to understand that I'm here for a reason. You might not understand it now, but at least respect that I'm here for a reason. I mean you don't have to like me, but I have a job to do, and I'm going to do it. I hope you can ride this ride with me, but if not, well, I'm here...

M.C.'s students discuss their respect for their teacher through personal incidences of consequences, chances and trust.

A.S: *What does M.C. do about homework?*
S: If you don't do it, she puts your name on the board.
R: Like if we didn't do our homework yesterday, we wouldn't have no BU today. Or we wouldn't have our field trip.

R: She (M.C.) gives us a lot of chances.

A.S: What kind of chances? Can you tell me an example?
S.: Say we're going outside and your name's on the board, and you say, 'Can I go out?' And she says, 'Okay, but only cause I'm going out too.'
R: But if we mess up that day, she makes sure we don't get no more recess.

S: And sometimes she's very easy on trusting people. Like the other time, when the whole class was supposed to be on the wall; we all played, and we all got in trouble, and she lost our trust which was only for like 2 days, and then she trusted us again.

Another component of helping her students to achieve excellence is to help her students "get it" (the content). M.C. spends much class time talking about how students' lives relate what they read and discuss in class. She often has students role play important
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scenes from stories and plays they read, and has spent several entire afternoons on one story.

> *A.S. I see you spent time doing that with the class--talking about that story-Dear Mr. Henshaw--*
> M.C....talking about how it made us feel. Even as adults I don't think we spend time enough talking about how it made us feel.
> they shared so many things, family stuff. I said, use discretion 'Don't air all your laundry.' You can share some things and not others.

Another component of helping students to achieve excellence in this classroom is through creating scholars. M.C. consistently models and demands high standards.

> M.C: Because they control their education, nobody else can do that. And that's what...I try to tell them--you're not gonna be an A student. Not everyone is an A student, that's not important. The important part is you do the best you can, and if you can't do something, that you seek out help. I want them to know that. If you don't know something, you need to tell your teacher, "Help me!" And as they get older, that becomes even more important. And as they get into bigger and bigger pools, they have to seek out that help, rather than think that it's the teacher's responsibility and she'll teach me, because it doesn't work that way. I want to see them being independent people, being responsible people, empowering themselves to make good things happen for themselves.

Students know that they are expected to think and to talk; to express themselves and their opinions.

> C: M.C. wants us to know that when we go to 6th grade, she wants us to be smart and she doesn't want us to just be there paying attention and not answering questions or being shy. She wants people to express their feelings and say everything that we learned about and to talk, to learn how to talk in front of people without being shy.

Students have internalized high expectations, and responsibility for their own learning.

> A.S.: What does M.C. think about work?
> R: Like she gives us really hard work.
> S: Like if it's messy, she won't accept it.
> R: Now she gives us hard work and if we get a C on it, she makes us do it over.
> S. And she says that when we're doing fractions and really hard work, she says "Take an educated guess". Because they're going to give you tests in 6th grade that you never saw before, and you can't just stand there, and whine and get mad, you have to do what you learned so far.

M.C. has developed strong relationships with her students. In answer

to the question of what she wants to make of her classroom, M.C. said:

> "Just a place where we enjoy to come and share and do things together. " Similarly, students described their classroom community as a place where they talk, laugh, and enjoy each other.
>
> S.: I always wanted a teacher like M.C. She talks to us. She tells us things. She laughs. She has a sense of humor with us. A lot of other teachers just to work and don't get to do that. They don't get to know the kids. M.C. does.(M.C.) is so nice. Other teachers they come in, they teach you, they go home, they go to sleep, and come back and teach...M.C. is like, we get to talk."

Students talked about members of their classroom community as family, and of the importance of collective efforts.

> S.: Everybody is like our brothers and sisters.
> R.: We always argue with our sisters and brothers at home and with our friends at school.
> ~~~~~~~~~~
> S.: We sometimes help each other, like when we get into a fight with somebody, we help them break up like...and we have best friends, we share each other's food.
> ...Sometimes if somebody steals something in our class, none of us will have recess or something. And if we gonna have to be in class with them, we're gonna have to be treated like our brothers and sisters and M. C. like our mother, right? So, that means that if they do something bad, we have to suffer with them.
>
> *A.S.: Oh, so it's the whole class's responsibility.*
> S. and R: Yes.

Overall, M. C.'s philosophy of teaching, combined with her high expectations for all students contributed to a classroom where all students were supported and encouraged to develop their abilities in both independent and group learning. There was much academic and social learning happening on a daily basis in M.C.'s classroom.

Discussion of Findings

The grounded theory that emerged from the data describes the teacher's emphasis on the process of helping students grow as people despite the emphasis of the district and her school on product-oriented tasks. The findings from this study were consistent with those of Ladson-Billings (1993) in her study of successful teachers of African-American students. This teacher helped her students to achieve academic success while maintaining a positive identity as African Americans (p. 13). This teacher promoted students' academic excellence despite little support from colleagues and administration. In her teaching each day, this educator made clear her beliefs in all students' abilities to learn and to do academic as well as social work.

Similar to Saphier & Gower (1997), this teacher made clear her expectations and support of students academic abilities. She emphasized that the work was important, that she believed in each student's ability to do the work, and that she wouldn't give up on them. This particular teacher believed strongly in helping students to grow both socially and emotionally in order for them to develop academically. Brown and Campione (1996) believe that "[E]nlisting students as designers and evaluators of their own learning is one of the most important activities of the Community of Learners" (p. 270). Consistent with the ideas of Brown and Campione (1996), this teacher created a comfortable, enjoyable classroom learning community in which there was mutual respect among all classroom participants. The teacher listened and learned from the students to determine alternatives to social and academic difficulties. Similarly to what Ladson-Billings (1994) termed *culturally relevant teaching*, this teacher consistently asked students to relate what they were learning in the classroom to their lives outside of school. She was always interested in her students' experiences. In addition, students were constantly asked and given time to develop and explain their ideas about what they were learning and why they were learning it.

In this classroom, all students created monthly social and academic goals which the teacher and student discussed and evaluated. All classroom projects were worked on over a period of time in order to complete thorough, finished products. This teacher consistently reminded students to be conscious of how they presented themselves to others, as well as how they presented their work. An additional finding was that the teacher worked at creating scholars--students who internalize high standards, think critically and who voice their opinions, and who take responsibility for their own learning. In sum, this educator, through her words and actions believes in a combination of these components for good teaching: mutual respect, developing student awareness of self and their work, creating a community of learners, helping students to grow as people (emotional and social growth), helping students learn tools for independent learning, and creating scholars.

Implications

In this paper, I have described and classroom learning environment which is designed to help students achieve excellence. Despite her school and district's focus on task-oriented products, reinforced by Massachusetts State Framework Standards, this teacher has created a learning community in which she helps students to grow and learn. In her classroom, students are respected, helped to understand, to grow socially, emotionally, and academically, and to develop an awareness of the presentation of themselves and their work. Although most teachers in this school do not share the same emphasis, this teacher follows as much as she can her way of helping students to achieve excellence.

In this study, I addressed threats to descriptive validity by interviewing both teacher and students. Threats to interpretive validity were addressed by discussing my observations with the teacher and students. I told the teacher and students my interpretations of classroom observations and asked for their interpretation and clarification on these points. I used Deborah Meier's book, The Power of Their Ideas, Jay McCleod's

book, Ain't No Makin' It, and Herb Kohl's I Won't Learn from You to ground me in theoretical constructs for analyzing my data.

What I have reported here is one view of one teacher in one urban fifth grade classroom in one school. However, school reform has and will continue to influence the daily lives of teachers and students in many schools in the state, as well as the country. I believe that this teacher is a model for educational reform. She emphasizes social and emotional growth, yet holds high academic standards for her students. All teachers should know about M. C., her beliefs about teaching and learning, and should be lucky enough to witness her classroom community in action.

I believe the limitations of this study were time constraints, and the fact that I conducted in-depth interviews with more girls than boys. There were several boys that I did not have the opportunity to speak with; some because they did not volunteer, others because they had not finished their work. The theory that my study helps to elaborate is discussed in J. MacCleod's Ain't No Makin' It. I believe that this school and district is a typical working-class example. Most of the emphasis is on product-oriented Standards, to the exclusion of requiring students (and teachers, for that matter) to be responsible for their own learning. The constraints that the teacher in this study feels are also typical. Her take is that teachers are required to have a certain number of "products" for each student done in a specific way by a certain date, but no time to share or develop with other teachers meaningful ways to do this. Despite the product-only emphasis, this teacher continues to teach in the way that has helped her students to achieve excellence.

Several questions for further study are related to gender. Why do the girls take on more active roles in this class? Why do the girls seem more verbal, confident, take more initiative, talk and say their opinions more, volunteer to read and role play, and ask for help more often than boys? Is it an issue of development? Is it nurture? Is it the models they have grown up with in their homes? Are the boys aware of this? Do they care? Is it a

gender issue? A class (socio-economic status) issue? This, to me, would be extremely interesting to pursue in further research.

As for further studies about the effects of school reform on teachers and students in urban and suburban classrooms, I believe that it would be highly beneficial for teachers, students, and policymakers to allot time to communicate how they are implementing the Standards and that teachers have time to share the ways in which they are incorporating new Standards into their classrooms. It would be useful to teachers, researchers, and policymakers to study other teachers in their classrooms to better understand how teachers and students work together in classrooms to achieve excellence.

Conclusion

As I discovered from my interviews and observations, despite district and state mandates which emphasized mainly product-oriented work related to the curriculum frameworks, this urban teacher implemented a daily practice of developing her students' social, emotional, and academic growth to promote successful learning outcomes.

There is a need for educators and policy makers to address the needs of all students --especially those in urban schools, who are most at risk for school failure (Kozol, 1991). It is important that we study exemplary teaching and teachers in urban schools in order to understand more about the ways conditions in urban schools influence teachers' and students' behavior, attitudes, and interaction, and the ways in which we may use existing exceptional teaching practice to educate pre-service and practicing teachers . There is also a need for educators to understand the philosophy, actions, and behaviors of exceptional teachers in urban schools so that we may use them to inform and prepare teachers to teach and to help all students excel in learning.

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mutual respect

- teacher and students respect each other
- believing in students

developing student awareness

- of attitude, presentation of selves and work
- importance of role of academics in lives of students

creating a classroom community within the community

- like a family
- learning is a collective effort
- parent-teacher-student communication

What makes the teaching of an African American teacher in an urban, multicultural classroom exceptional?

helping students grow as people

- listening, consistency, advocating, and legitimizing students' lives and experiences
- making students' real-life experiences a part of the daily curriculum.

helping students "get it"

- help with academics through patience, purpose, tools, fun
- emotional support

creating scholars

- internalizing high standards
- telling their opinions
- critical thinking
- responsibility for learning

A. Seldin. AERA, 4/99: What makes the teaching of an African-American teacher in an urban, multicultural classroom exceptional?

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